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Editorial

Like former President Richard M. Nixon, the Central Intelligence Agency has a central taping system that automatically and secretly records all conversations in the offices of the CIA's most senior officials.

To keep the inventory of prior recordings within manageable proportions, the CIA periodically destroys the oldest tapes. In January 1973, however, CIA Director Richard M. Helms initiated an extraordinary action — he ordered the destruction of all existing tapes.

Only one week earlier, Sen. Mike Mansfield, D-Mont., the Senate's majority leader, had written to Helms specifically requesting that the CIA retain and preserve all evidentiary materials relating to the Watergate scandal because a select Senate committee was launching a full investigation of the matter.

What did the CIA have to hide? A great deal, including involvement in a variety of covert domestic operations — activities specifically prohibited in the agency's charter.

Five of the seven men accused of breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee had direct links to the agency. Because several remained unusally loyal to the agency, it is reasonable to assume that the CIA had prior knowledge of the planned crime — but did nothing to prevent it.

In September 1971, three of those five men participated in a similar break-in at the offices of a Los Angeles psychiatrist. The CIA provided technical assistance to the burglary team.

E. Howard Hunt, one of those arrested in connection with the Watergate break-in, ostensibly left the CIA payroll in 1970 — but in the ensuing two years, the agency's Techinical Services Division provided him with fake driver's licenses, a wig, voice alteration devices, a tape recorder disguised as a typewriter and a camera hidden in a tobacco pouch.

In a desperate effort to divert attention away from the White House, Nixon and his most senior aides devised a scheme in which they claimed a full investigation of the Watergate scandal would adversely affect "national security" and compromise sensitive CIA operations.

Because neither the White House nor the CIA could afford to be subjected to a full investigation, the two institutions were drawn into a quiet yet deadly serious struggle to keep attention focused on the other organization.

Into that plot stepped Robert F. Bennett, son of former Sen. Wallace F. Bennett, R-Utah, and president of a Washington public-relations firm.

Bennett's company provided "cover" to CIA agents in Singapore, Amsterdam and other cities around the world. The CIA paid half of Bennett's legal fees in connection with his appearance before the federal grand jury probing the Watergate scandal.

Bennett, says Charles W. Colson, one of Nixon's few senior aides not directly involved in the scandal, "was reporting everything he was doing to the CIA every two weeks."

One CIA memo reveals that Bennett claimed to have established a "back-door entry" to Edward Bennett Williams, then attorney for the Democratic National Committee, to "kill off" disclosures that might embarrass the CIA or his company.

Another CIA internal document, written by the head of the agency's Central Cover Staff, notes that Bennett believed he could influence the outcome of the Senate investigation.

That same memo says Bennett continually fed material to Robert Woodward, one of the Washington Post reporters assigned to cover the Watergate scandal, and that Woodward was "suitably grateful."

In the struggle between the two organizations, the CIA clearly emerged victorious — but there's an important postscript: In the years immediately after Nixon left office in disgrace, the CIA faced perhaps its most difficult crisis because of revelations about wiretapping, mail covers, surveillance of dissident political groups and other illegal activities.

There are those who believe that Nixon partisans remaining in Washington engineered those disclosures in retribution for what the CIA did to the former president.